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231312Z Nov 05

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 05 YEREVAN 002062

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR EUR/CACEN, DRL, EUR/ACE
DEPT PLEASE PASS USAID

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [EAID](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: ARMENIA: DEMOCRACY PROMOTION STRATEGY, 2005-2008

MOVING THE ARMENIANS FROM RHETORIC TO REFORM

¶1. (SBU) Armenia is at a crossroads in its democratic development. While the political landscape has remained relatively consistent since the last elections, the next two years will test the government's commitment to its reform agenda. As Assistant Secretary Fried said during his October visit to Yerevan, the next two years could push Armenia ahead of the pack in terms of democracy or could pull the country significantly backwards. Slippage could have negative consequences at home (as the country prepares for parliamentary and presidential elections in 2007 and 2008) and abroad (as talks over the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict enter a crucial phase). Armenia's impressive economic performance could be accomplishing much more for the country were it not for widespread corruption that threatens the integrity of democracy in Armenia. Most businesses and government leaders now recognize this fact, but need to act soon in order to maximize the benefits of the country's double-digit GDP growth.

¶2. (SBU) Progress in our bilateral relationship depends on Armenia's progress on democracy. During the September 2005 U.S.-Armenia Task Force on Economic Cooperation, we called on the Armenians to recognize the link between maintaining macroeconomic growth and strengthening democratic institutions. EUR/ACE's Tom Adams reminded the Armenian side that our USG assistance can only work to its maximum potential when democracy is allowed to grow. As another element of our bi-lateral relationship, the Millennium Challenge Account process relies on a concrete set of indicators that will determine Armenia's continued eligibility for the program and help us push the country in the right direction.

¶3. (SBU) The GOAM recognizes that the revolutions in 2004 and 2005 in Georgia and Ukraine have heightened international interest in democracy -- and free and fair elections -- in this region. After flawed elections in 2002-2003, there is considerable pressure at home and abroad for transparent balloting during the next parliamentary and presidential elections (scheduled for 2007 and 2008). All eyes are currently on the November 27 referendum on the proposed constitutional amendments as an indicator of the GOAM's commitment to free and fair elections. The referendum serves as an important starting point for our strategy and will help identify those areas where special interventions are necessary to help Armenia to make the necessary reforms.

OUR STRATEGY: MPP GOALS, SPECIALIZED ASSISTANCE

¶4. (SBU) Strengthening democratic institutions in Armenia is an integral part of Post's MPP goals. We have convened a special working group from membership of Post's Assistance Coordination Group (ACG) to look at how we can better achieve these goals during the run-up to parliamentary and presidential elections in 2007 and 2008. Free and fair elections in 2007 and 2008 are our target. The Democracy Strategy Working Group (chaired by the DCM) studied the experience of the 2002-2003 elections, the findings of various international observer missions, and the conclusions of the USAID-funded political party assessment as part of its brainstorming exercise. We have identified ten areas where USG interventions can help make a difference. USAID, the Public Affairs Section and Political/Economic Section will play key roles in carrying out these activities. USAID has developed a proposed strategy of core programs that will shape the majority of our interventions.

I: DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENT, PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

15. (SBU) We will continue to keep democracy at the top of our bi-lateral agenda with the Armenians, maintaining the momentum of recent high-level visits (including those of A/S Fried and Congressional delegations). A consistent message by the USG that our partnership with Armenia depends on real commitment to democratic strengthening will help maximize the impact of our democracy promotion strategy. We should not be shy about citing the USG's robust levels of assistance (USD 1.6 billion since Armenia's independence) as an investment in democracy that must reap dividends in order for us to justify it to Congress and the American people. Post will openly share our democracy promotion strategy with the GOAM and point to it as a prime opportunity to enact long-overdue reforms.

16. (SBU) We offer our strategy as another way the USG can help move the country toward its stated goal to integrate with Western structures as a modern democracy. The Ambassador will repeat this message with GOAM interlocutors and the press and we will stress this theme during the upcoming sessions of the U.S.-Armenia Task Force on Economic Cooperation (USATF). Discussions regarding Millennium Challenge Account funding should continue to focus on democratic reforms and the need to register continued progress on the MCC's democratic indicators. As parliamentary and presidential elections approach, carefully timed visits by Department and Congressional delegations will offer useful public diplomacy opportunities to spread this message beyond the political elite to the Armenian population.

II: A BETTER VOTERS' LIST -- THE CORNERSTONE

17. (SBU) The Problem. Inaccurate voters' lists were the most notable technical problem of the 2002-2003 elections in Armenia. Considerable movement of people due to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, high emigration rates over the past 15 years and inadequate monitoring systems exacerbated the problem. Lingering doubts over the list are a source of political contention, contribute to voter apathy and are used by all segments of the political establishment -- either to justify boycotting elections or to justify imperfect balloting. During the 2002-2003 elections, international monitors noted that some voters were registered in more than one precinct, or were not included on the list; the voters' lists even included the names of people who had died.

18. (U) Our Involvement to Date. In 2003, USAID (in partnership with the OSCE, a local NGO and the Eurasia Foundation) supported the development of software to convert the local state registries to voters' lists and to identify inaccuracies in the voters' lists. In the 20 communities where they used the software, observers cited significantly fewer problems. While effective for limited use, there were some problems with this software and it was not applied nationwide. In 2002 and 2003, USAID (through IFES) supported Voters' Lists Advisory Committees (VLACs) to work with local authorities, election officials and the media to check local voter lists for inaccuracies. The work of the VLACs resulted in over 32,000 edits to the voter lists in sixteen communities.

19. (U) Our Intervention. An accurate national voter registry will offer Armenians a reliable foundation for elections. With proper registration of voters, every person who is entitled to vote will have a chance to have his or her voice heard and the GOAM will reduce the possibility of fraudulent voting. USAID is prepared to support GOAM efforts to establish a national voter list in advance of the 2007-2008 elections by helping to design, develop and implement a national voter registration initiative. Our assistance will include the development of the voter registry system as well as procurement of necessary equipment to training personnel tasked with every aspect of the voter registry. The Voters' Lists Advisory Committees will continue to play an important role in this effort and will help ensure that the process is transparent. A reasonably accurate national voter registry will offer all Armenians (the voters, politicians and civil society monitors) an even playing field and will help increase confidence in the integrity of the democratic process.

III: BETTER ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

110. (SBU) The Problem. Weak electoral administration has plagued previous elections in Armenia. Despite the existence of clear regulations, election authorities are unable to administer elections in a fair and transparent manner. This has negative consequences for both the integrity of election results in Armenia as well as for voter confidence and participation. The Central Election Commission does not have the technical ability to provide

all lower election commissions with copies of the electoral code, CEC decisions or other documents about how to conduct a free and fair election.

¶11. (U) Our Intervention. Post will supplement ongoing UNDP training for election commissions and will support the publication and nationwide distribution of all necessary technical documents so that commissions have the proper tools to administer elections fairly. USAID will design study tours for election commission members to observe elections in other countries. The Public Affairs Section will send groups of 5-6 election officials on International Visitors programs to observe the administration of the 2006 elections in the United States. USAID will also consider commodity support for election administration (similar to the procurement of transparent ballot boxes that USAID co-funded in 2003).

IV: ELECTORAL ADJUDICATION AND THE JUDICIARY

¶12. (SBU) The Problem. The uneven adjudication of electoral grievances undermines the democratic process in Armenia. Courts do not always act in a transparent manner and often base their decisions on political pressures rather than clear guidelines. A change in the composition of election commissions to include members of the judiciary (a mostly positive step) will create a staffing shortage in the judiciary during the upcoming elections. There will be a need for legal professionals trained in electoral adjudication to fill this gap.

¶13. (U) Our Intervention. We have increased our support to the judiciary in recent years and will deepen our engagement around electoral adjudication. USAID will provide specialized election adjudication training (keyed to the new election law, related violations and how to address them) to judges, lawyers and proxies. We will support legal rights awareness programs related to administrative detentions and provide resources for those who report violation of electoral rights. International Visitors programs will be timed to give Armenian judges and lawyers opportunities to observe election adjudication procedures (and best practices) in the United States. ABA/CEELI will continue to implement cross-cutting programs for USAID and INL on a wide range of issues to complement these efforts.

V: PARTICIPATION AND VOTER INFORMATION

¶14. (SBU) The Problem. Experience has shown that the public is passive, even apathetic in the run-up to elections. Following flawed elections, however, voters have taken to the streets to protest in relatively high numbers. The public's engagement in the election process is uneven and can be easily manipulated. Part of the problem stems from a lack of information about issues and electoral rights. There are few opportunities for Armenians to get involved with elections or informed about issues beyond highly politicized rallies or spotty media reports which tend to be skewed toward a particular candidate. The active participation of an informed and engaged public prior to the 2007-2008 elections will increase pressure for free and fair elections and make it harder for authorities to commit violations.

¶15. (U) Our Intervention. We will support voter education campaigns utilizing a variety of mechanisms including televised debates, radio programs, town hall meetings, public service announcements, newspaper and billboard campaigns, election observation, parallel vote tabulation and Rock-the-Vote events with NGO partners. Democracy Commission Small Grants programs will also be keyed to these themes and will target hard-to-reach parts of the population. Ongoing civic education programs will include electoral rights as part of a nationwide curriculum for young Armenians who have proven effective in sharing information with heads-of-household throughout the country. Post's impressive array of NGO, alumni and exchange networks will ensure broad-based participation in these programs.

VI: POLLING AS A RELIABLE POLITICAL WEATHERVANE

¶16. (SBU) The Problem. Polling is underdeveloped in Armenia and the lack of reliable national polls leaves the public and political parties out of touch with important issues and attitudes. The absence of reliable polling data means that irresponsible claims by the media or parties can go unchecked. Political parties are less likely to concentrate on substantive policy issues if they do not know what matters to Armenians today.

¶17. (U) Our Intervention. USAID will develop the capacity

of local survey organizations and will help stimulate the (apparently ripe) market of political client-based polling in Armenia. Working with polling firms to develop appropriate techniques and procedures, we will engage reputable organizations who can provide world-class technical assistance on the appropriate role of polling in a democracy. USAID may also directly support the conduct of some polls, thus shaping the political debate.

VII: STRONGER POLITICAL PARTIES

¶18. (SBU) The Problem. The 2005 Political Party Assessment noted that political parties in Armenia are weak and underdeveloped. The report found that USG assistance to political parties to date had produced limited results and needed a fresh approach in order to be effective. Parties often do not allow for the active participation of certain parts of Armenian society (including women and young voters). Parties do not have neither the technical capacity nor interest to effectively communicate with their constituencies and develop issue-based platforms or discussions. Instead of deepening political culture, political parties are often personality-driven entities with shallow internal structures that mutate with regularity. The role of political parties is therefore often confusing for voters and contributes to confusion and/or political apathy.

¶19. (U) Our Intervention: USAID will provide political parties with technical assistance and training about the utility and advantages of issue-based strategies, message development and dissemination, platform formulation and campaigning tactics. Our programs will include a focus on women's involvement in parties and the engagement of first-time voters and university students. Training for women candidates, NGOs and youth wings will feature prominently in our programs. (Note: Assistance of this kind will continue to be offered equally to all democratic political parties in Armenia. The USG will continue to assure GOAM authorities that the purpose of this assistance is not to secure the election of a particular candidate or party. We will be careful to include parties who are part of the governing coalition and opposition. End Note.)

VIII: CONTINUING OUR FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION

¶20. (SBU) The Problem. As in many countries of the former Soviet Union, a culture of corruption in Armenia threatens to de-stabilize those democratic institutions that can help ensure a free and fair election. Recent studies point to the cultural and institutional roots of corruption in Armenia and indicate that no part of society or the government is protected from corruption's negative effects. The perception of widespread corruption contributes to voter apathy and empowers those officials who view electoral violations as an accepted part of the political culture.

¶21. (SBU) Our Intervention. Post's on-going anti-corruption programs will include increased emphasis on how corruption undermines the integrity of elections and democratic institutions. USAID is in the initial stages of design for a dedicated anti-corruption activity that will feature prominently as part of our strategy. All USG assistance activities in Armenia include some aspect of anti-corruption in their programming. The Assistance Coordination Group has compiled an exhaustive inventory of anti-corruption activities and will continue to highlight this document as part of outreach activities and during discussions with implementers and GOAM counterparts. We will encourage partners in the diplomatic and donor community to follow this example as a way to increase political pressure on the GOAM to move from rhetoric to actual implementation of its 2004 anti-corruption strategy.

IX: A REAL ROLE FOR THE MEDIA

¶22. (SBU) The Problem. The media's bias and partiality become more evident during election cycles in Armenia. It is common practice for politicians to pay for newspaper articles and media spots that favor their candidacy or blast their opponents. The public is unlikely to look to the local media as a source of unbiased information regarding political issues or campaigns.

¶23. (U) Our Intervention. USAID-funded media programs already include technical assistance devoted to journalistic ethics and management during election. We will increase our focus on campaign reporting and political advertising. The Public Affairs Section will organize an International Visitors program for journalists and editors on the role of

the media during elections in the U.S. Digital video conferences at the Embassy will connect Armenian journalists with U.S. specialists on the subject of the role of media during elections. An International Speaker program focused on issues of free and fair elections will include a component on the media and journalistic ethics.

X: MONITORING AND THE INT'L COMMUNITY

¶24. (SBU) The Problem. Not all parts of Armenian society appreciate the importance of election monitoring in the democratic process. Some election officials at the local levels view monitors with suspicion and have reportedly meddled with their activities. At the highest levels, the GOAM still needs to realize that election monitors, both local and international, help underscore legitimacy when elections are free and fair.

¶25. (SBU) Our Intervention. Continued technical assistance to the It's Your Choice (IYC) NGO will ensure that nationwide observation will take place during balloting in 2007-2008. USAID will support pre-election assessments, media monitoring and observer training. Post will participate in OSCE-ODIHR international observer missions and will contribute actively to seminars and roundtables devoted to these topics as part of our public diplomacy strategy leading up to the elections.

COORDINATING WITH THE DEPARTMENT

¶26. (U) Post appreciates Department support for these initiatives and looks forward to discussing ways we can maximize this golden opportunity. We will continue to maintain close contact with EUR/ACE, DRL, ECA and USAID through our points of contact and EUR Desk Officer. USAID is already busy developing its plan to implement these programs and has prepared two versions of detailed outlines of possible programming that it will forward to Washington as this dialogue continues.

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